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Book Review – Journal of Macromarketing

Jean-Claude Usunier and Jörg Stolz (Editors)

Religions as Brands: New Perspectives on the Marketization of Religion and Spirituality.

Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. 256 pp. £58 and \$109.95 (hardcover list prices, eBook available)

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Jean-Claude Usunier and Jörg Stolz's edited volume *Religions as Brands: New Perspectives on the Marketization of Religion and Spirituality* builds upon and contributes to the extant literature on the status of religion, religiosity, and religious institutions in contemporary consumer society (see Jafari, 2014 for a concise classification). As a perfect companion to Gauthier and Martikainen's (2013) *Religion in Consumer Society: Brands, Consumer and Markets*, this book both supports and challenges some of the established classical sociological accounts of religion (e.g., the relationship between capitalism and religion, economics of religion). Once again it reveals that, with the expansion of consumer culture, the secularization thesis will continue to be heatedly debated in different areas of the social science (see Gauthier and Martikainen, 2013).

The book consists of a preface, thirteen chapters organized in four parts, followed by bibliography and an index. In the Preface, David Voas deems collaboration between sociology and marketing critical to the development of new insights on how modern theories of marketing and economics of religion can jointly inform religious organizations. In his view, applying the concept of "branding" can help religious organizations to promote religion, particularly in an era where: (1) religion's image is fairly or unfairly associated with "negative things;" (2) secular

organizations deliver diverse products/services as substitute for religious offerings; and (3) religious institutions (un)intentionally compete with one another.

Part I, the Introduction section, is comprised of two chapters. In Chapter 1, Jörg Stolz and Jean-Claude Usunier set forth the theoretical foundation of the book. With a brief reference to research showing that in consumer society devoted communities are shaped around brands as quasi-religions (Muñiz and Schau 2005), and that religious institutions adopt branding strategies, the authors rhetorically ask: “Are then religions becoming brands while brands are becoming religions?” (p.4). Next, they provide a commendable analysis of the historical antecedents of religious consumer society: (1) the 1960’s modernization processes – a breakdown of religious norms, a change in values, and increase of disposable income, individual security, exposure to mass media, and individual mobility “have led both to extended religious markets and to less religiosity” (*italics original*) (p. 5); (2) the form of belonging to religious groups – a shift from compulsory membership of traditional institutions that determined individuals’ religious identities and social activities to voluntary membership in non-profit associations/organizations with philanthropic goals; and (3) alternative affiliations – instead of traditional institutions in which people would feel obliged to socialize with others in order to sustain their social status, religious organizations are now competing with numerous secular enterprises that offer the same opportunities.

Such changes have immensely affected both the demand and supply sides of religion. On the one hand, consumer culture has provided people with a wider array of options (both religious and secular) to choose from, and has increased their expectations that religious organizations offer diverse, high quality, and entertaining products/services (see Gauthier and Martikainen 2013). On the other hand, since religious institutions have to compete with other (both secular

and religious) organizations, they need to apply modern marketing techniques in order to strengthen their brand image.

Building on this discussion, Jean-Claude Usunier in Chapter 2 refers to the inclusion of religious services (identified as code 9591) in the GATS (General Act on Trade of Services, 1995) as part of the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations. Usunier argues that religious services (but not religion itself) are commoditized in the global market. On this basis, he outlines a few assumptions – for example, “economy = market” (p. 30); in market economy “commoditization relies on the indirect reification of subjects” (p. 32) – to conclude that in order to compete with other commercial religious and secular institutions, religious organizations have no choice but to abide by market rules and utilize modern marketing. However, he acknowledges that marketization of religious services may paradoxically “cause some religious consumers to switch to a disinterest for religions or to autarkic consumption of spirituality” (p. 43).

Part II, organized in five chapters, focuses on the supply side: how marketing concepts are used by religious organizations and entrepreneurs. In Chapter 3, Oliviere Favre provides empirical data to discuss how, as a mission-driven organization, the Swiss-based International Christian Fellowship (ICF) succeeds in its radical growth strategy. Targeting young individuals and focused on evangelization, ICF uses innovative methods of promotion (e.g., using charismatic TV celebrities) and delivering services (e.g., entertaining sermons) to fulfill its mission. ICF has realized the power of igniting emotions in individuals who are in search of new ways of experiencing meanings of religion and God without being caught up in traditional hierarchical structures of religious organizations. In Chapter 4, Thomas Wagner’s ethnographic research further demonstrates how Hillsong Church (an Australian megachurch) operates as a

modern business enterprise (e.g., putting established businesspeople on the board of directors and generating income through sales of CDs, books and event management) with a strategic branding vision. Using music as an experiential vehicle for meaning making, Hillsong employs a sophisticated process (i.e., recruiting renowned songwriters, monitoring lyrics, pre-launch field test, quality control of final products, and ongoing brand perception research) to produce songs that consistently convey the message of the Church. Using both standardization and adaptation methods, Hillsong continue to serve its members across different countries.

Chapter 5 presents Markus Hero's analysis of building trust between suppliers and consumers of spiritual services. Relying on the literature of services marketing, the author argues that the marketing of spiritual services (credence goods) requires sophisticated processes of assuring clients of trustworthiness of services. The processes that suppliers can engage in include: adopting and patenting appropriate names to build and sustain one's reputation; joining renowned associations or professional organizations and following government regulations; using credible intermediaries such as fairs to present oneself to skeptical consumers; and building strong narratives or self-biographies as evidence of their expertise, authenticity, genuine belief in what they offer, and sympathy towards their clients. In a rather different essay, Jason Dean in Chapter 6 examines the historical religious landscape in France to argue that since the country's secular regulations (*laïcité*) do not allow religious pluralism, one cannot apply the rules of free market economy to religions in a highly regulated context. Using the case of "Justly Balance Islam," – the slogan of French Muslim Rally (RMF), which won the presidency of the French Council on Muslim Worship – Dean asserts that the RMF's success was not due to its distinctive positioning amongst other Muslim groups (such as FNGMP and UOIF who used the same slogan). Rather, the socio-political conditions of France (during the time of terrorist

attacks in Europe) made the slogan appealing and familiar to the public and state. RMF's agenda was particularly close to that of the French state. In Chapter 7, Hanifa Touag's ethnographic research into the practice of roqya (exorcism) by raqis (exorcists) demonstrates how Salafi Muslim exorcists attempt to establish themselves as therapists in the mental health sector and differentiate themselves from their rivals such as marabouts, talebs, and seers whose practices they consider as shirk (associating beings or things with Allah). By emphasizing the purity of their practice, solely centered on Koranic psalmodies and treatment, raqis claim that they are the only practitioners who, by connecting to Allah, are capable of treating patients.

Part III, arranged in three chapters, investigates how religiosity influences the demand for religious or spiritual services/products. In Chapter 8, Jochen Hirschle's empirical investigation of German young Catholics reveals a positive correlation between the expansion of consumer culture and increase in disposal income in Germany with these individuals' decreasing involvement in religious activities. Hirschle argues that his study further documents' Emile Durkheim's classical thesis that religious activities were largely associated with social engagement (e.g., socialization, belonging to groups, and entertainment) and, with the development of capitalism, secular institutions (e.g., markets) provided alternative avenues for people to socialize, spend time, and engage with entertaining activities. Chapter 9 presents Haytham Siala's quantitative study of devout Moslem consumers' attitudinal loyalty towards religiously exclusive high-involvement brands (e.g., car insurance) in the UK. The author concludes that since religiosity has a significant impact on consumers' attitudes (i.e., loyalty and perception) towards high-involvement product/service providers, businesses should regard religiosity as an important dimension of their target market's profile. In Chapter 10, and in the context of sustainability, Elizabeth Stickel-Minton employs a quantitative method to compare

and contrast the effectiveness of different ways of measuring religious affiliation in consumer behavior literature. Her study indicates that due to the varying degrees of religious commitment within religious groups, the most common religious affiliation grouping system based on general denominations, such as Catholic, Protestant, or Baptist, does not provide a reliable theoretical model to apply to the study of consumer behavior. In contrast, the fundamental classification model (fundamentalist, moderate, and liberal) has a more effective analytical power. Stickel-Minton's work can help revisit the existing assumptions found in comparative studies on religious groups' consumption behaviors.

The last three chapters in Part IV do not share a common theme. In Chapter 11, Roger Finke and Christopher P. Scheitle critique the existing literature (including works by Finke) on the debate over "whether religious pluralism results in increasing or decreasing religious participation" for its lack of attention to understanding and explaining the nature and origins of religious pluralism. The authors assert that, depending on the degree of religious freedom (i.e., state interference) in a sociocultural context, pluralism can be related to either supplier (the number of religious groups) or consumer (people's religious preferences) pluralism. Using the theoretical model of "demand fulfillment" they argue that supplier pluralism is related to many factors such as the multiplicity of religious preferences, presence of multiple ethnicities, population size, and religious groups' history, socioeconomic status, and identity issues. Eventually they claim that the correlation between pluralism and participation can be studied only when there is balance between demand and supply. In other words, if there are not enough suppliers for consumers (or vice-versa), the correlation cannot be established.

In an intriguing essay in Chapter 12, Steve Bruce critiques the application of economic rational choice theory to the study of religion for three reasons:

“Firstly, there is the empirical observation that most people inherit rather than choose a religion. Second, religious people do not generally think of themselves as having the right to choose; God chooses them rather than the other way round. Third, where religion is popular and socially important, it is usually associated with other bases of social identity which prevent, constraint, or inhibit choice to an extent that is not found with the sorts of consumer goods and services that conventionally occupy the time of economists” (p. 198).

Bruce is also skeptical of the growing literature (including this book to which he contributed) on branding and marketing religions as he forcefully argues that “choice” can only matter in largely secular societies. The secularization process (loss of the authority of the institution of religion) can avail people to choose what “god(s)” they may worship, but even this may not mean that they do not carry with them the fear of disobeying the true God.

Finally, in Chapter 13, Philippe Simonnot presents an historical analysis of the business model of the Temple of Jerusalem to argue how Jewish monotheism aided Jewish orthodoxy to sustain its monopoly over time, a model that, in Simonnot’s view, Christianity and Islam also attempted to imitate. As the author believes, monotheism helped to convey a single message to the followers of the religion who would deal with one God only.

Overall, the book offers a valuable collection of chapters. The critical essays in particular are thought provoking and offer opportunities for researchers in marketing, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines to rethink some of the most taken-for-granted assumptions about religious freedom and markets. As I have already highlighted (Jafari 2014) in another review, books of this kind provide further evidence for the fact that marketing and consumer behavior scholars should feel more confident in investigating religions/spirituality in the context

of contemporary consumer society. With the established history of consumer culture studies, doctoral students can particularly embark on new research journeys to study the topic (religion) from a macromarketing perspective. Within the existing literature on the religion-market nexus, including this present book I have reviewed, issues of politics and ideology are significantly overlooked. Such pressing matters have been the subjects of a series of calls (e.g., Ger, 2013; Süerdem, 2013; Jafari et al., 2014) for new research generation that would problematize the very notion of religion and religiosity. As Bruce's critical account in this edited volume reminds us, the way religions function in different societies highly depends on how religiosity is perceived and authorized in a given context. The field of marketing has already identified religion as a macro environmental factor (e.g., typically in PEST analysis in marketing education or cultural belief system) or religiosity as a personality trait in micromarketing. Religion has also been the subject of research for its contribution to different areas such as quality of life, ethics, and so forth (see, Benton 2014). Now it is time that researchers, who are interested in the intersections of religion and markets, endeavored to investigate how religion and religiosity/spirituality are (mutually) shaped, influenced, and authorized by other institutions such as states, market ideologies, traditions, and the like.

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